



International Women's Network in Estonia

Report of survey

Migrants' experiences: Racism and xenophobia in Estonia
Author: International Women's Network in Estonia

2024

Introduction

This work aims to promote gender equality, enhance diversity, and support the integration of migrants into Estonian society. The online survey was conducted publicly and shared in diverse private and public groups through social media platforms targeting expat communities and individuals living in Estonia. It aimed to identify the challenges migrants face concerning racism and xenophobia in Estonia. Additionally, it seeks to explore potential solutions to address these societal issues in collaboration with Estonian organizations and institutions.

Our organization understands the importance of exploring the views and experiences of the migrant community and creating spaces where those experiences can be heard as crucial first steps in identifying solutions. We recognize that to effectively address these issues, we must first identify the problem and its various dimensions.

In the summer, the survey findings were presented to ministry officials responsible for anti-racism initiatives in Estonia. This presentation was made at the invitation of the Equality and Policies Department of the Estonian Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications.

Key Definitions

What is RACISM?

The process by which systems and policies, actions and attitudes create inequitable opportunities and outcomes for people based on race.

Racism is more than just prejudice in thought or action. It occurs when this prejudice – whether individual or institutional – is accompanied by the power to discriminate against, oppress or limit the rights of others.

What is XENOPHOBIA?

It implies discrimination based on the perception of the other as foreign or originating from outside a community or a nation. However, manifestations of xenophobia can occur against people of identical physical characteristics, even of shared ancestry, such as when people arrive, return or migrate to States or areas and are considered outsiders (Eurofound, 2011).

Background

In the anonymous survey, participants were asked to share information such as their gender, age, nationality, and purpose for coming to Estonia, among other details.

The graphs indicate that the majority of participants were female, with ages primarily ranging from 30 to 44. Surprisingly, the survey highlights the diversity of Estonia and the variety of backgrounds from which migrants in Estonia come.

Figure1 shows the identity of the participants (IWNE, 2024)

You identify yourself as

47 responses

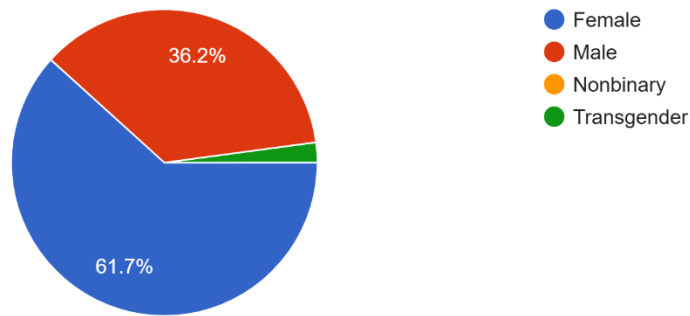
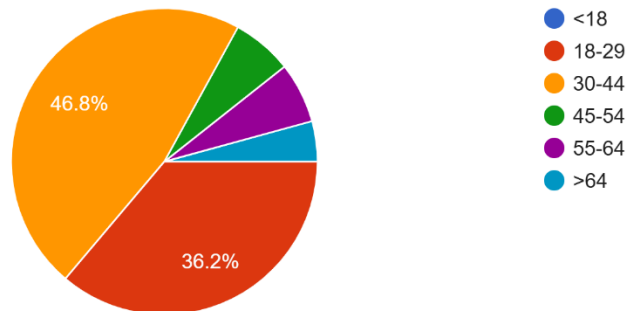


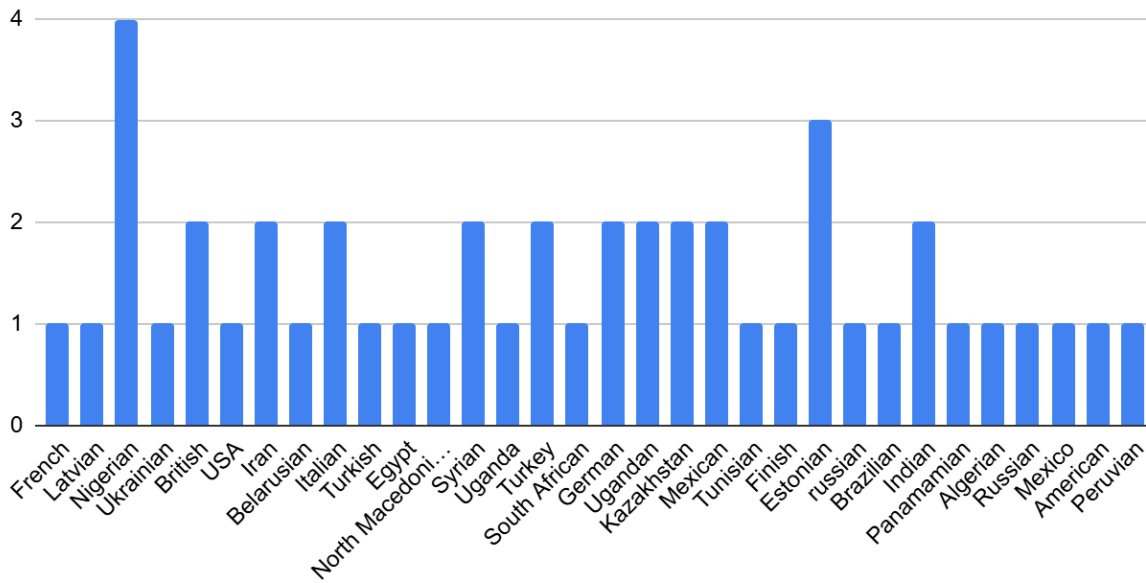
Figure 2, age rate(IWNE, 2024)

Age

47 responses



Count of Nationality



Count of Nationality

Figure 3, nationality (IWNE, 2024)

How long are you living in Estonia?

47 responses

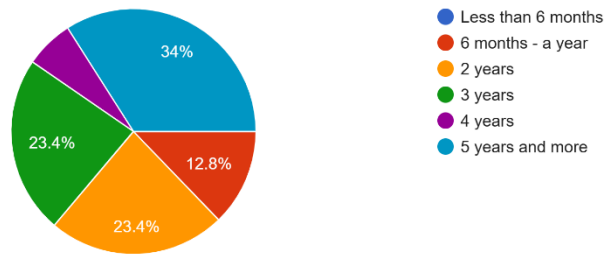


Figure 4, length of stay in Estonia (IWNE, 2024)

I came to Estonia

47 responses

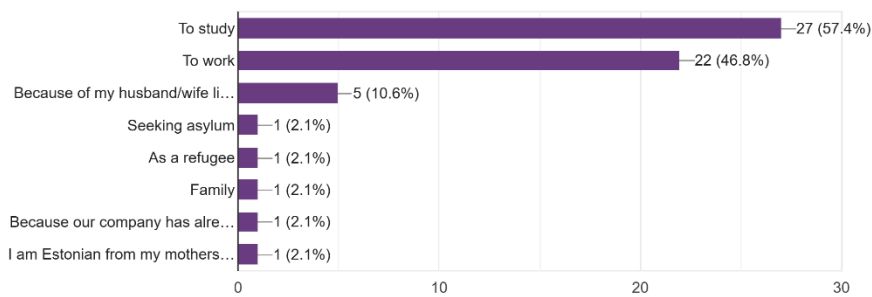


Figure 5, the purpose of the stay (IWNE, 2024)

Results

Participants were asked to share their experiences and stories, freely and anonymously, where they could express what they encountered in different places and the level of events that happened to them.

The results show some statistics of racism and xenophobia, complemented by participants' stories.

Data shows, that most of the participants experienced racism or xenophobia more than once, and mainly in public spaces. It is worth noting that more than half of the participants witnessed the same situation more than once and again in public spaces. They were asked to share the reason why the result came out for the majority that it is related to race, nationality, language and gender.

Figure 6, the number of experiences in racism and xenophobia (IWNE, 2024)

I have experienced racism or xenophobia at work, from service users, from friends, social media, etc
(add in others if it is a specific place you wish to add)

47 responses

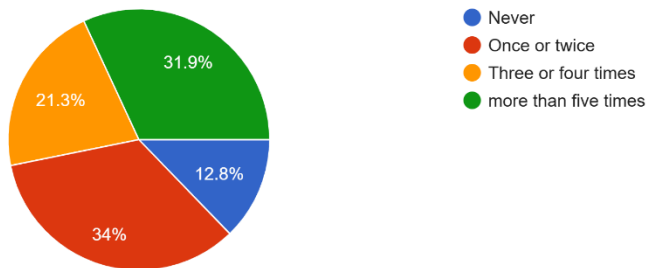
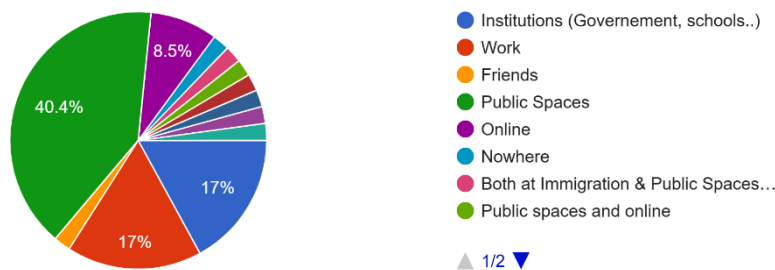


Figure 7, identified places (IWNE, 2024)

Where did you experience racism or xenophobia ?

47 responses



I have witnessed racism or xenophobia at work, from service users, from friends, social media, etc
(add in others if it is a specific place you wish to add)

47 responses

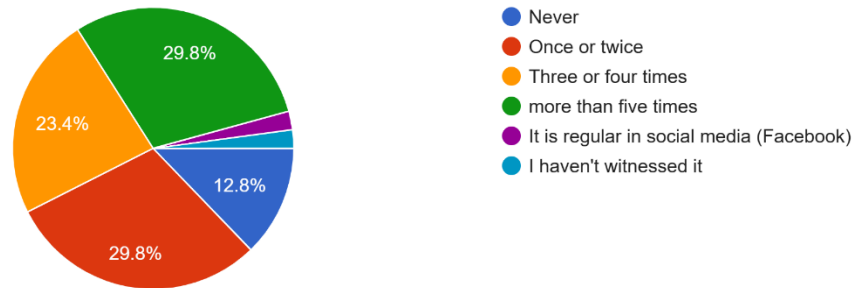


Figure 8, the number of experiences witnessing racism and xenophobia (IWNE, 2024)

Where did you witness racism or xenophobia ?

47 responses

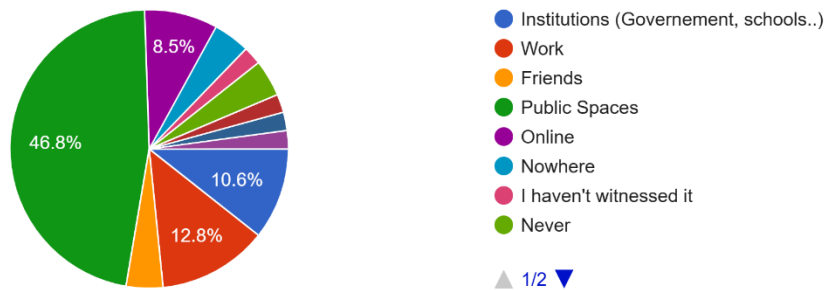


Figure 9, identified the place (IWNE, 2024)

If you experience or witness racism or xenophobia, to which aspect was addressed?

47 responses

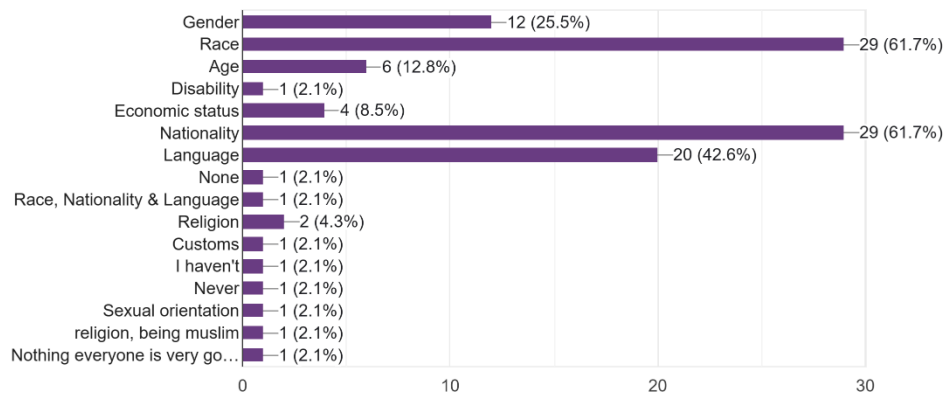


Figure 10, identified reasons (IWNE, 2024)

By the end, participants were asked to share their stories and explain the impact of racism or xenophobia in their lives. The survey also carried the questions to ask about actions and solutions.

<p>I did not experience any, on the contrary, I have not often feel that safe as a woman in my life, even in my own country - I can go outside, even very late, even in places quite isolated, without any fear - I was also very well helped by my colleagues, supervisors, doctors or immigration services, even if my Estonian is clearly not good - As a foreigner, I felt particularly cared about, especially in vulnerability situation (I fall seriously ill at some point) - Maybe there were some remarks about how foreign and especially how French I look, but since I am not speaking the language, it is not that hard to guess, and after all I am French, that's not a bad thing to tell.</p>	<p>Even though me and my husband are permanent residents of Estonia, have work and real estate here, have demonstrated knowledge of Estonian language and permanent ties to Estonia, we are implicitly considered suspicious, foreign, etc., when it comes to court proceedings in foster care case.</p>
<p>Lady at the Summer Concert who didn't want me to sit next to her & her friend in the only free space on the park bench & was very insulting in English & the Estonian language.</p>	<p>The most cases of such an attitude to Ukrainians come from Russians living in Estonia. Once I was attacked at a bus stop by a local Russian man. He was drunk and shouted loudly that we should not stay here</p>
<p>Not being able to speak the language raises barriers sometimes. I've seen negative reactions to my coloured friends from time to time but not often. I know it occurs more frequently to them than to me as an older, white, British female.</p>	<p>I was with a friend who received racist remarks at a bus stop.</p>
<p>Most effective racism I faced with was the time that my students (3rd year bachelor student) and I (as 3rd year phd student) applied for the same position and He got the job. The position didn't have the Estonian language skill and asked fir master degree.</p>	<p>I have seen black or south Asian people being treated as less important. Also felt a bit negative because my Estonian is still poor</p>
<p>Times when I was walking with my friends and I witnessed racism although in my case, lack of knowledge about countries makes some people easily put you in a bad position, by putting status on you and critically making up stories about your reason to be in the country. This is happening more in public spaces which can be intense and not healthy.</p>	<p>I'm a Muslim so almost every time I go out I experience people shouting something at me. Like "terrorist", "Allahu Akbar", "oh my God", "go back to your country".</p> <p>From shops I experienced people being rude to me and saying "it's not like in your country,</p>

<p>I didn't witness in working place but I carry others stories regarding that how they were excluded.</p>	<p>we don't have such stuff" when in fact i found the thing i was looking for literally 2 meters away from the lady that said this.</p> <p>On the internet people often don't look at me as a student, a woman, or a citizen. The first they identify me as is a Muslim. More precisely, a radical muslim that spreads extremist propaganda (which is not at all true and i never ever even mention my views (which are obviously not radical) to anyone.</p> <p>They take my existence as if I am attacking them, which I never intend and it upsets me to the core that I can't even exist in peace and mind my business.</p>
<p>Exclusion from social events because of language, in settings where international people presence was consistent (workplace, university-associated organizations)</p>	<p>I was in a restaurant with my family. Only the tables around us were available and others were reserved. One person came looking at us with disgust. She was asking the waitress to be able to sit in the reserved places because she didn't want to sit near us. I felt disgusted by her speech and behaviour. Eventually she left because she didn't want to sit at a table near us.</p>
<p>During the language course, the lecturer mocked my native language Arabic when he was talking to me in front of the class.</p>	<p>On a bus, where an old man clearly didn't find it nice for me to be on the bus. He was shouting at me on top of his voice but I had a good response from the passengers and the driver. Also, once in the Facebook group where I made a post and I was asked to return to my country.</p>
<p>I haven't personally experienced racism or xenophobia in Estonia, but I have in another country. However, I am aware that people might hold stereotypes about certain nationalities and races worldwide. In Estonia, my friends have shared stories about being mistreated at work because of their race and nationality, including being treated differently and yelled at. Also, I am aware of a public chat in Estonia from a few years ago that spread racism and xenophobia, sharing pictures of people of color and their locations as targets for attacks.</p>	<p>I was applying for a second residence permit and it was rejected three times. While communicating with the Police asking about the requirements and reasons for the decision, I was receiving emails in Estonian, taking into account that I was writing in English since I don't know the Estonian language. Maybe it's not considered xenophobia, but using only the Estonian language for formal means of communication with expats or foreigners may lead to misunderstanding due to potential mistakes in translating emails for example.</p>

<p>I really haven't experienced or witnessed any of the above</p>	<p>The most recent one was at a bar. I was sitting down with two Estonian females and a random "white" man came to our table and started chatting nonsense. Calling me all sorts of names and using the "N word". He went as far as yelling that blacks will ruin the country and should all be killed. It was a horrible experience and we almost came to blows but i restrained myself because at the end of the day the system will always support him.</p>
<p>I don't have a specific story to share in mind.</p>	<p>My partner is Estonian. We have been stopped on the street by older Estonians who ask why I am with him (this happened in Pärnu but we live in Tartu). Racism is a lot more rampant online in community groups where people respond in Estonian asking why a foreigner has an opinion on the topic, and to use their language, not English.</p>
<p>A colleague connected certain racial attributes with their impact on local women in terms of sexual demand</p>	<p>Never have i experienced any racism</p>
<p>my friends and i were walking in the old town square in tallinn as a group (we are central asian) and couple of groups of people passing greeted us in chinese and made faces</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In Möku a man choke me and broke a beer glass on my head because I was dancing next to him and two other African friends. I didn't speak to this person but he had a problem with one of my friends earlier, accusing him of stealing his wallet. 2. I approached a group of men in Rütli to ask for a lighter when one of them started getting aggressive and the one I was talking to told me "you have to leave". I asked why, to which he responded, "because you are different". 3. Two teenagers pepper sprayed me randomly on my way home.
<p>1- I recently found out that at the population registry my nationality (rahvus) is indicated as arab which I think doesn't define me as a Tunisian, we're not just arabs we're a blend of different civilizations and this coming from a small country as Estonia is disappointing.</p>	

<p>2- I once met with an Estonian who works for the military and after we talked for a while he told me that he was surprised to know that there were Tunisians highly educated that come to Europe he only had the image of illegal immigrants coming from Africa.</p> <p>3- At work, I often heard comments from Estonian colleagues about the accent of colleagues who come from India and Pakistan.</p>	
<p>I have been ignored by service personnel due to approaching in English. But this is very very minor compared to what I have heard my middle-eastern, asian or african friends go through here in Estonia</p>	<p>Groups of Russian migrants are attacking people of European descent. While a random Russian migrant witnesses false evidence about it to the police. Discrimination in all sectors including work is decent and if you know a bit of a Russian, but speak Estonian, you will have a good chance to be discriminated against as well. Non White Russians discriminate white Estonians on a basis of race as well</p>
<p>- I have seen black friends yelled at multiple times, with people telling them to go back to their countries</p> <p>- I am constantly denied in apartment rent applications for being brazilian - they told me that</p>	<p>Faced it while looking to rent an apartment where the broker asked to not cook in the apartment as Indian food stinks. Old ladies on the side of the road staring and saying go back to your country.</p>
<p>2 times:</p> <p>1. I was at Viineri tram stop, speaking with a friend, a lady stared at us, as soon I intercepted her stare she started shouting insulting us saying 'Pidoras go home'.</p> <p>2. I was in Paldiski Pakri torn with my boyfriend, we were just looking s map to check what to do. No kisses, no acts of affection. There were 2 kids playing around and a group of dudes. This random dude approached us screaming are you black live matter, are you pidoras? We ignored him and he started speaking in Russian and then switched to English the same question. I replied mida vitu? And he pushed me. We just walked away and he ended screaming.</p>	<p>I have two. First one - my husband's job application for a position in a public sector got denied because of my nationality. Second - I personally, got rejected with a job because of my nationality (have applied to be a teacher, have all the qualifications - bachelors and two masters - and B2 level of Estonian, which btw I have achieved in less than two years. According to the current laws, B2 is enough for foreign language teaching at schools.) And, as a cherry on top, when I shared my stories and concerns with an advisor at Töötukassa, she said, that this is sad, but normal in my case.</p>

<p>I don't want to go back to those memories</p>	<p>1- walking around Karlova, a supposedly friendly neighborhood I was pushed aside by a group of men and called mustlane</p> <p>2-every day walking is realizing that people will stared at me. Not normal, not even 3-5s, a long one</p>
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<p>The CEO straight up did a hitler pose at a company retreat and mocked Indian people.</p>	<p>I am Latin American and I have been told at work that my food is too smelly and I can't bring it there to eat. I have also been asked why I don't own a Spanish flag (not my country) when I speak that language. Have also been told that education here is different compared to the one in my country, implying that in my country kids get yelled at all the time unlike Estonian education. It's more of micro-racism situations with me but these all happened in the work environment and left me feeling emotionally exhausted.</p>
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<p>I was at a party with my friends. I wear a hijab and was drinking only energy drink. My Turkish friend came up to me and laughingly said it was very funny that I was there</p>	<p>Mostly I experienced unpleasant encounters in public spaces, men come extremely close/touch/say racist things/follow. I notice them doing it towards women and POC. I also experienced discriminatory behaviour at university, where people talk down at you because of lower level in hierarchy, bringing up the nationality. It is hard to find rent as non-EU, family doctors refuse to take you because you're non-EU. Couple of acquaintances had a similar experience where public official talked about locals' national superiority, and another person was beat up and shouted racist insults at (police took the side of the attacker and didn't register the case).</p>
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<p>I was going to Rimi one day with a friend a car stop by and said fuck you niggas go back to your country</p>	<p>When I say I do not speak Estonian I get sometimes no answers at all or get angry remarks or are treated not friendly at all. ---- At an event a transwoman has been spit in the face while walking through a park --- A friend of mine from Ukraine (no refugee) has been spit at in Kristiine Keskus.</p>
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<p>On social media some people say 'go home' whenever they feel questioned or challenged</p>	<p>I know of a few muslim female students who were told to take off their Hijaabs, (head scarfs) one was threatened with expulsion</p>
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	and the other was made to feel very uncomfortable. I also know of a woman who was not allowed to wear it in her place of work. I also felt upset by the yearly book of KAPO which mentioned Muslim students being a source of trouble for teachers in the near future. As my children are Estonian Muslims, I felt very upset about this.
I experienced physical violence, in a public space (outside grocery store), and almost lost one eye. I am open to share my experience, but not sure if people will take it seriously.	

Table 1, stories of participants experiencing racism or xenophobia (IWNE, 2024)

What impact, if any, do you think racism or xenophobia has had on you?
47 responses



Figure 11, impact of racism and xenophobia (IWNE, 2024)

The final steps of the survey focused on the actions taken to address this issue, where the participants shared if and how they took an action when facing racism or xenophobia or if they would like to take further action on this topic.

I do not believe that in our case it can be tackled, as most officials are too smart to say it out loud. In words, there is no discrimination. However, in actions we are considered as non-locals using the privileges of locals, i.e. adoption or fostering.	I told her off. I wish there was a number publicly advertised that one can call in and report such cases so the complaint is then investigated and the offender goes through a re-orientation program. Also a name-&-shame link to report such cases as a deterrent.
I have shared contacts of a special police officer who deals with online bullying with	Being raised in a multicultural society, I often heard about or witnessed acts of xenophobia,

<p>other Ukrainians who have experienced that. I have tried to advocate for others at different times. A student was experiencing distress due to problems in his home country and a work colleague did not understand and I tried to explain his issues. On another occasion I tried to reassure a work colleague that they were valued by me even though they were immigrants. Even though I'm a white, British female, I call myself an immigrant and not an ex-pat to identify myself with others who are from other countries. Being white does not make me any less an immigrant than my non-white friends and colleagues.</p>	<p>therefore, I somehow developed techniques to live with it. I believe the best approach to addressing this issue is through education, remaining calm, and avoiding acts of violence. By educating each other about our differences, we can help others see the beauty in diversity. With a little patience, I believe most people are open to learning more about one another.</p> <p>Estonia, as a young country with a history of multiple occupations, understandably has a strong sense of identity and culture. Estonians may come off as cold initially, but in my experience, this is just a protective shield. Once you get to know them, they are willing to open up and connect, but gaining their trust is essential. Estonia is also relatively new to attracting migrants and is still learning how to create welcoming gestures.</p>
<p>I have denounced it when I can</p>	<p>Increasing awareness, lecturing and openly talking about it which might affect small numbers and expand more. Try to be the voice of others who experienced the worst.</p>
<p>I feel nothing is not possible to change.</p>	<p>I usually stay silent not to escalate the situation and share my experience with my close people. I wish I could do something more about it, but currently I don't see any ways. People on the street just pass by and people from online just stay online</p>
<p>I participated in world refugee day activities</p>	<p>Only discussed with friends</p>
<p>I would like to take action by telling my stories.</p>	<p>Sometimes you are not sure about the people's true intentions. So in my situation I was confused whether he was just funny or mean it. That is the reason why I did not take any actions.</p>
<p>The major step I have taken is by first making sure I explain what it means to be an African and not the generalisation from the media. I have spoken to some young locals who were even surprised at how I was able to speak and flow with them. I think racism comes with a mentality of being inferior and I tell my</p>	<p>Yes. Advocacy campaigns that aims at improving ways of communication within public institutions.</p>

fellow people of colour to stand tall wherever they are and continue to be law abiding.	
I haven't experienced or witnessed any of the above, thus haven't been motivated to take action against them	I am confrontational with bigots online. In person, it is harder because most Estonians just share looks of disapproval (of our interracial relationship) but say nothing.
I do speak up when understanding there is a problem with discrimination	No. I didn't want to make a big deal out of it
after the first two, and specifically regretting not reporting the first, I did report the 3rd time to the police.	Other than discussing and trying to explain my view I haven't taken other actions.
I have participated in multicultural events aimed at increasing tolerance towards foreigners	I had to defend myself against multiple attacks and then defend my right for self defence. I also try to push public opinion to deport all such people back.
To myself no. To external denounce the police.	No, I don't know where to actually address it and which can be the expected outcome
No, because I feel like if I do anything, I will be sent out of the country	Educate on diversity
I would like to work on campaigns and with your organization in general. I'm a sociocultural anthropologist and I think I can be of help :)	Not sure, locals are dismissive of such cases assigning it to be an isolated case committed by a drunk/unstable individual. Feels like foreigners are on their own. Being unacknowledged before and standing on the shaky ground (being non-EU, requiring visa and having less rights) made me stay silent, forcing me to get used to the things as they are.
I haven't because I know it won't change that part of life in Estonia generally. No one would ever treat you equal	We started some projects to tackle racism and fear of the unknown and I always take part in surveys or sign petitions. I also held a speech at the IDAHOBIT day in Tallinn.
I try to raise awareness as much as possible.	I filed a complaint to Police, though still waiting for a response.
When I am with others and in public spaces, I am very reactive and shout back. At work, I have had talks with my manager about it.	When I am with others and in public spaces, I am very reactive and shout back. In work, I have had talks with my manager about it.

Table 2, actions and opinions to improve racism and xenophobia (IWNE, 2024)

Conclusion

The survey conducted by the *International Women's Network in Estonia* highlights the pressing issues of racism and xenophobia encountered by migrants in Estonia. This report captures the complex and varied experiences of migrants who, despite seeking integration and contributing positively to Estonian society, frequently face prejudice in public spaces and workplaces based on race, nationality, language, and gender. The findings reflect not only the regularity of these encounters but also the emotional toll they impose on individuals.

Participants shared accounts of both overt discrimination and more subtle, systemic biases that hinder their daily lives. They also expressed a desire for actionable solutions, from increased public awareness and education initiatives to reporting mechanisms and support networks. These stories underscore the need for collective action from institutions, communities, and individuals to create an inclusive and equitable society.

In our work, we have found that the solutions to the issues facing migrants come from intersectional approaches that consider the need to co-create solutions involving allies from all sectors of society. We were honored as an organization led by migrants to be invited to present this topic to the Estonian government. This invitation already represents a significant step forward in recognizing migrant voices and promoting a diverse approach to collaborations that is more attainable for all members of Estonian society, regardless of their background.

Presenting these findings to Estonian officials in the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications was a crucial step toward formal recognition and action. Moving forward, it is essential to translate these findings into policies and programs that actively challenge racism and xenophobia, thereby creating a safer and more welcoming environment for all. The International Women's Network in Estonia remains committed to working with local institutions to ensure that these voices are heard and that meaningful changes are implemented.